

# **Lehi Carter Airport**

## **By Richard Van Wagoner**

### **(Richard's Inlaws)**

Brash men steering noisy speeding autos through Lehi streets still cluttered with horse-drawn vehicles were completely outdone in 1913 by a publicity gimmick arranged by Mill Ross, editor of the "Lehi Banner". The occasion was the first airplane to fly over Lehi, piloted by "Birdman Christofferson".

Lehi's Main Street had been lined with one thousand school children when viewers from Lehi Junction telephoned to say the plane had been spotted coming around the Point of the Mountain. Following the D. & R.G. tracks, Christofferson flew eastward along Main Street at an altitude of four hundred feet. On a pre-arranged signal from Editor Ross, a bundle of copies of the "Lehi Banner" was dropped--landing ten feet from the man. The papers were given to representative business men and to the public schools as souvenirs of the "first aeroplane flight to Lehi."

To boys coming of age during the early golden years of aviation, those jaunty men and their flying machines seemed wondrous. Christofferson, a relative of twelve-year-old Vern J. Carter. Christofferson, a relative of twelve-year-old Vern J. Carter, landed for a visit on the Carter family farm at Lakeshore in 1916. Spellbound, young Carter was taken aloft in the "Birdman's plane".

Enthralled by flight all its possibilities the farm boy found life never again the same. From that day forth he dreamed constantly of the day when he too would escape gravity's tether and fly off to a new world. After taking a few flying lessons in Utah County, the adventurous seventeen-year-old set off for California to fulfill his vision.

The Utah lad spent most time taking the few available aviation courses offered at the California Institute of Technology. Along with other young pilots

(notably Charles A. Lindberg) Carter enjoyed soaking up flight talk and innovative ideas. At that same time he was busy earning cash to gain experience in the World War I planes which had been brought back from service in France. After training on an old Curtis OX5 Jenny, a ninety-horsepower machine, he graduated to the more powerful Thomas Morse Scout, the Hispano-Guinea Spad, and the four-hundred-horsepower liberty De Havilland.

In the post-World War I years pilots had to do just about everything but build their own planes to make a living. Teaching in a flight school was one way to make a buck, barnstorming was another. In this gypsy-like lifestyle, flyers like Carter made the rounds of countless county fairs and celebrations to drum up enthusiasm for short-hop flights and flying lessons. To generate business they often had to resort to such dangerous tasks as stunt flying, parachute jumps, and wing-walking.

After a whirlwind of flying-related activities, including stunt work in a John Wayne movie titled, “Wings”, Carter returned to Utah. Soon afterward, he married Jessie Welsh and settled down to raising a family and making a living from his flying skills. For a time he flew for Tommy Thompson’s flying services, National Parks Airways, and Western Airlines. In the spring of 1936 he bought a large tract of land in Salt Lake County at Twenty-first South and Thirty-fourth West, and established the Utah Central Airport, which he operated until 1952. In 1948 he purchased another tract of land on a Lake Bonneville bench at Draper and opened the Carter Sky Ranch in 1950.

He sold the Draper property in 1960 intending to retire, but instead bought property in Lehi for another airport. The January 3, 1962 “Lehi Free Press” announced that he had purchased sixty acres on the bench northeast of the city water-settling tanks. He immediately set to work grading a 3, 900-foot-long gravel landing strip which ran in a north/south direction. In addition he erected a large prefabricated hanger for repair, maintenance, and storage of airplanes.

The Carter Airport featured air taxi service, sight-seeing trips and FFA-recognized flight training and mechanic instruction and FFA-recognized flight training and mechanic instruction. W.T. Piper, founder of the Piper Aircraft Corporation, and more than one hundred local businessmen, newsmen, and flying enthusiasts were on hand for the July 29, 1966 dedication of the new airport. Three weeks later on August 18, 1966, while working alone in the airport hangar, Vern Carter collapsed and died.

His widow, also a pilot, leased the airport to Maynard Meyers and Sheridan Owens in the spring of 1967. The official opening of AA Aviation, which included a “fly-in” of nearly fifty planes, was held on June 24. As part of the airport opening, George C. Morris, President of the Utah Owners and Pilots Association, presented Jessie Carter with a posthumous award for her husband. The citation read:

*For his long and outstanding service to aviation for 42 years of dedicated teaching and inspiration to countless students, for his many former students who are now flying for major airlines all over the country; for his work as the first pilot to count fish and game by air, and as the first to suggest utilizing skis on planes, as a pilot with Western Air Lines, as a pioneer in safety in aviation, for his development of several airports in the State of Utah; all of which have left a profound and lasting effect on the many who have benefitted from his years of contributing to aviation, the Utah Owners and Pilots Association hereby convey their appreciation and respect to Vern J. Carter.*

Meyers and Owens were not successful with the airport. Jerry W. Brailsford of Springville leased the facility, and along with local pilots Abe Ekins and Grant B. Smith re-opened for business on October 10, 1968. Brailsford, a masonry contractor, constructed a new two-story office at the airport from which he operated his masonry business. In 1972, Jessie Carter sold the property to Jess Peck and Gary Elton, but the airport ceased operation shortly after this. Over the years vandals have essentially destroyed all the buildings.

In 1992, the airport's wind vane is unresponsive to even the strongest gusts. The runway is choked with weeds and rutted by vehicles. No planes have landed there in more than a decade. Unless one knew the history of what occurred atop that hill there would be little indication that the place was once a beehive of aviation activity-- a sadly short-lived dream.